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The Professions

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During the second half of the eighteenth century, the traditional 'learned professions' – the Church, the Law, and Medicine – took on a new and distinctive social character as the 'liberal professions', 'liberal' in the sense of befitting a gentleman. Together with the Army and the Navy – known as the profession of Arms – the Church and the Law in particular, and Medicine to a lesser extent, came to be regarded as suitable occupations, both socially and financially, for the sons of gentlemen.* This applied to younger sons in particular, since amongst the landed gentry primogeniture prevailed, the custom, legally sustained, by which the eldest son inherited the family estate, living off the income alone and handing on the property intact and undivided to his own eldest son. According to Mary Crawford, 'there is generally an uncle or a grandfather to leave a fortune to the second son' (MP, 92); or he might inherit money or land from his mother's side of the family. If not, along with the other younger sons, he would be left to make his own way in the world, to earn a living in one of the gentlemanly occupations that the liberal professions could provide. In the colder moral climate that arrived towards the turn of the century, employment came to be valued for its own sake as a force in character building and a guard against idleness, benefits available to eldest and younger sons alike. This thinking stands behind the pronouncement that Jane Austen gives to General Tilney: that he considers 'it expedient to give every young man some employment. The money is nothing, it is not an object, but employment is the thing. Even Frederick, my eldest son, you see, who will perhaps inherit as considerable a landed property as any private man in the country, has his profession.' (NA,176).[1] As to which profession, the army (Frederick's line) was the favoured choice of aristocratic families; the law was well-regarded for its earning power and its usefulness in a political career; while the church, along with medicine, was rising steadily in remuneration and status. Very often the choice was determined by family tradition. There were established medical, legal, clerical and service families; and in a society where patronage and connections counted for so much, the well-trodden family path could be the most profitable road to choose. Lowly merit, too, found its reward. Advancement in a profession enabled those who were not born of the gentry to enter its ranks, a process reinforced by the idea that since the gentry entrusted their lives and fortunes to physicians and lawyers, and their souls to the

*Beyond the four professional groups recognised during Jane Austen's lifetime, modern historians have come to identify a further professional group, the holders of 'offices and places', servants of the crown, officials we would to-day call civil or public servants. As there is no mention of them in the novels, they are not covered in this entry.

clergy, so these professionals should themselves be men of standing in society. As Adam Smith put it in The Wealth of Nations (1776), 'Such confidence could not safely be reposed in people of very mean or low condition. Their reward must be such as may give them that rank in the society which so important a trust requires'.[2]

The importance of the professions to the world of the novels can be gauged by the prominence of professional figures: the clergymen, headed by Mr Collins and Mr Elton, Henry Tilney and Edmund Bertram, with Mr Collins ready to hold forth on 'the profession of a clergyman' (P&P, 101); the naval men led by William Price and Captain Wentworth; together with a scattering of other clergymen, soldiers, sailors, lawyers and medical men. Moreover, in line with the leading moral and educational writers of the time, Jane Austen makes the choice of a profession, and issues of professional knowledge, professional duty, income and the sense of vocation, topics for discussion and debate among her characters. Her young men are just embarked, or about to embark, upon professional careers; those around them are concerned for their success; and the structure of the professions, with their distinct hierarchies, and the ambitions of their lowlier members, answer Jane Austen's style of social comedy, with its attention to the snobberies and pretensions of rank and class.

Much of Jane Austen's knowledge of the professions came from her own family connections and the circles in which she moved. On her father's side in earlier generations there was a body of medical Austens. The lawyers in the family were headed by her father's guardian and benefactor, her great-uncle Francis Austen of Sevenoaks, who prospered as agent for the Sackville estate at Knole. Her mother's father and grandfather were clergymen; and immediately around her was a wide clerical society which included her own father, two of her brothers and an extensive network of clergy relatives, friends and acquaintances. Jane Austen was also familiar with the profession of arms. Her sailor brothers Francis and Charles served throughout the twenty years of the French wars and beyond, and she drew upon their naval lives in the writing of MP and P. Similarly, it was in 1796-97, at a time when her brother Henry was serving in the Militia, that she first drafted P&P, giving the story a timely background of redcoats and Militia camps.

In the pages that follow, I outline each of the professions – save for Medicine, which is covered by John Wiltshire in 'Medicine, Illness and Embodiment' – as they stood during the period of Jane Austen's lifetime. But a note of caution is in order. As much as her depiction of life and manners is detailed and accurate, it supports a fictional scene which is highly selective and limited in range. With few exceptions, Jane Austen's focus is upon the cultivated and prosperous gentry society of London, Bath and the southern counties, the world in which she was at home. But we should remember that this was a privileged setting. The England that lay beyond this scene was very different, not least for the professions and for the conditions of professional life.

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The Church

- this being the established Church of England and no other church is mentioned by Jane Austen. The prominence of clergymen in the novels is an accurate reflection of the central place they occupied in rural society at this time. In country parishes, the rector stood alongside the local landowner or squire at the head of the community. Beyond his church responsibilities, the

rector played an active part in the social life of the neighbourhood and in its civil administration, carrying out such duties as the registration of births, deaths and marriages, the conduct of the Poor Law, reporting on the manpower available for wartime service in the Volunteers, sitting on the bench of magistrates, and so on – much as we see Mr Elton working alongside Mr Knightley in Highbury.

In about half of the country's 10,500 parishes the church livings were the property of local squires. With ownership came the right of appointment, opening the way to respectable employment for younger sons, a niche that became increasingly attractive towards the end of the eighteenth century as livings rose in value. At one end of the scale (according to a Parliamentary enquiry in 1802) about 1000 church livings were worth less than £100 per annum, with another 3000 between £100-150, barely enough to live on. But it was another story for country parishes in the prosperous south. Ownership of the glebe (the church farm), together with the tithes, produced an income that rose in step with the rising value of both agricultural land and its produce, a boom that lasted until 1814. In the 1770's, Mr Austen's two Hampshire parishes were worth about £200. Thirty years later, their value had gone up more than four-fold: the tithes were producing £600 and the glebe £300. This change in the economics of farming and land ownership had much to do with the attraction that the Church now held for the sons of the gentry.

Clergymen without family connections were obliged to look elsewhere for patronage. The Crown, Bishops, cathedral chapters, and the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, together controlled several thousand livings, although these were often reserved for appointees. As for the rest, young ordinands such as Edward Ferrars would depend on the goodwill of unmarried squires like Colonel Brandon or, at worst, would resort to some degree of special pleading, a situation Jane Austen caricatures in the oily obsequiousness with which Mr Collins courts Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Mr Bennet, knowing that Darcy's patronage, as a considerable landowner, is larger still, amuses himself by advising Mr Collins to 'stand by the nephew. He has more to give' (P&P, 383). And beyond the fortunate clerics remained a body of clergymen, calculated in 1805 to number up to 45% of those ordained, who never found a church living and were forced into dead-end employment as penurious curates hired for as little as £50 a year, or turned to teaching or some other occupation outside the Church.

This surplus in the number of ordinands is partly explained by the fact that entry to the profession was relatively undemanding. The minimum age for ordination to deacon was twenty-three, to priest twenty-four. A candidate was required to present himself to a Bishop with (amongst other papers) evidence of his degree (from Oxford or Cambridge, sixty percent of whose graduates entered the Church), a 'Certificate from the Professor of his having attended the Divinity Lectures' and letters from his college testifying to 'his learning and good behaviour' and to his worthiness 'to be admitted to holy orders'.[3] A candidate also faced examination by the Bishop's Archdeacon to ascertain that he was someone 'apt and meet for Learning and godly Conversation to exercise your Ministry duly, to the Honour of God and the Edification of his Church'.[4] Then followed examination by the Bishop to satisfy himself that the candidate was competent in Latin and sufficiently acquainted with the Scriptures, the Church liturgy and the 39 Articles. This procedure was as demanding or undemanding as his Lordship chose to make it. As the Bishop of Sarum remarked, 'a great measure of piety, with a very small proportion of learning, will carry one a great way'.[5]

Yet, as we know both from the novels and from historical evidence, in the average parish clergyman of this time one was as likely to encounter worldliness as 'piety'. Henry Tilney is

perfectly at ease passing the season sociably in Bath. Out of clerical dress, he circulates as a young man about town, returning to Woodston only for an occasional visit, such as a 'parish meeting' (NA, 209). And there were recognised devices for a clergyman to make the best use of his time and money. One was 'pluralism', the occupancy of more than one living. If these were neighbouring parishes, a clergyman might serve both without undue strain, travelling between the two, as Mr Austen himself had done between the adjoining parishes of Steventon and Deane. For parishes some distance apart, the clergyman might be an 'absentee' for one of them, paying a curate to fill his place. Although such arrangements were widespread – Jane Austen's brother James had three parishes and was offered a fourth – with the rise of Evangelicalism they came under increasing criticism; and Jane Austen uses Sir Thomas Bertram to urge the case for a clergyman to be 'constantly resident' and in touch with the 'wants and claims'of the parish as no 'proxy' can be (MP, 247).

Over the course of the eighteenth century, these 'wants and claims' had considerably lightened. In many parishes, the routine two Sunday services had fallen to one, with Holy Communion celebrated only once a month. Sermons were commonly borrowed or adapted from printed collections.. Midweek duties were confined to occasional baptisms, marriages and funerals and visiting the sick – these 'claims' attended to according to the conscientiousness of individual clergymen, or left to the curate. At one extreme, according to Mary Crawford, was the 'slovenly and selfish' clergyman: 'His curate does all the work, and the business of his own life is to dine' (MP,110). Then comes the clergyman in 'nominal residence', as the practice, accepted and tolerated, was termed, visiting his parish on Sundays only, or rarely more, in the manner of Henry Tilney. At the other extreme is Jane Austen's figure of the true professional, Edmund Bertram, a young man approaching ordination thoughtfully, visualising himself in prospect as a resident clergyman setting a Christian example to 'the parish and neighbourhood' by living up to 'those doctrines which it is their duty to teach and recommend' (MP, 93). However, of the doctrines themselves, and larger church matters, Jane Austen has nothing to say.

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The Law

As a consequence of Parliamentary legislation and the regulation of the Inns of Court and other legal bodies, the law was the most visibly and effectively organised of the professions; and of all the professions it offered the greatest opportunities for social, political and financial advancement. Rank-and-file solicitors (usually known as attorneys) qualified by way of five years' apprenticeship in a legal office as an articled clerk, for which an annual premium was paid. In a country practice, of which, in 1812, there were just over 4300, this would be up to about £200. London attorneys numbered about 1800 and in a sought-after and successful practice, a placement which would attract the sons of the gentry, the premium would be as much as £500-600 a year. When the clerk's apprenticeship was completed, he came before a judge, to be examined (if at all, a perfunctory procedure), sworn in, admitted and enrolled as a working attorney, now qualified to practice. Beyond the fees and commissions to be earned from his bread-and-butter work – witnessing oaths, drawing up wills, deeds and marriage settlements etc – a capable attorney could make considerable sums as agent for a landed estate – as the suitably-named Mr Shepherd, Sir Walter Elliot's 'agent' (P, 9) and so 'completely empowered to act' (24), handles the letting of Kellynch Hall. An attorney might also engage in property transactions on his own behalf, providing loans, mortgages and an informal banking service for the benefit of his clients. In addition, he might serve as an MP's election agent, distributing

bribes etc, or even enjoy a taste of power and local recognition himself as clerk to the magistrates'court and other official bodies.

The upper branch of the legal profession was composed of the barristers, a small and highly select group – about 600 in 1810, not all of them active – the only lawyers permitted to address the courts. The path to qualification was steep. It required sufficient income to support five years (three years for university graduates) keeping terms at one of the four Inns of Court, the London institutions which held the exclusive right to admit students to the Bar. On top of this were pupillage fees paid to the barristers in whose chambers they learned their law or to the solicitors in whose offices they worked as clerks. Once called to the Bar, further money was needed to support themselves in the early years of practice when briefs were few and far between. Alongside these serious students were fashionable young bloods who patronised the Inns of Court as a smart social and dining club, but with no intention of practising law seriously. We hear of these idlers in S&S when Edward Ferrars, rejecting the law as a career, recalls those 'many young men, who had chambers in the Temple, made a very good appearance in the first circles, and drove about town in very knowing gigs' (103). Nonetheless, notwithstanding the slow and costly start, for the diligent the Bar was 'the surest road to riches and honour'.[6] An average yearly income for an established barrister was £4000, with the possibility of rising to £15,000 or more. As to 'honour', the Bar was the training ground for Judges and Lord Chancellors. It also opened a political path. One in four MPs was a barrister – a predominance remarked on caustically by Cobbett: 'We have been brought to our present miserable state by a lawyer-like policy defended in lawyer-like debates'.[7] Barristers were favoured for government appointments; they were prominent in the Cabinet; and Prime Ministers Pitt and Addington were of their number.

Of these upper ranks, we hear virtually nothing in Jane Austen, merely a passing reference to a judge in Darcy's family. John Knightley, residing in Brunswick Square (a fashionable development of the 1790's) and described as 'rising in his profession' (E, 92), is evidently a barrister. He has 'chambers' (471), the lawyers' rooms in the Inns of Court, and he comes to Hartfield and Donwell Abbey for the 'long vacation' (91), this being the technical term for the summer recess of the law-courts. As to solicitors and attorneys, these usually appear in a servant-like capacity, as Mr Shepherd, 'a civil, cautious lawyer' (P,11), ministers to Sir Walter Elliot. Otherwise, they are regarded at a distance, snobbishly, as objects of derision or contempt, country lawyers most of all. In P&P, for example, Mr Phillips, the Bennet girls uncle, is just this, a 'country attorney', one of the family's 'low connections' (36), and one of the 'strong objections' (186) advanced against Jane's marriage to Bingley. Mr Cox may be termed 'the lawyer of Highbury' (E, 214). But in the stratifications of this community, with it fine 'gradations of rank' (136), he finds no place among the 'chosen and the best', only among the 'second set' (20). Emma Woodhouse's dismissal of him as no more than 'a pert young lawyer' (137) – in her eyes, upstart and uppish – is a gentry put-down. Yet this is distinctly backward-looking and defensive, for Mr Cox is a man whose profession has already carried him some rungs up the ladder and promises to carry him further, perhaps one day to gain entry to Highbury's select circle of the 'chosen and the best'.

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The Profession of Arms

The wars with France, from 1793 to 1815, raised the prestige and popularity of the military profession and vastly enlarged its numbers. The Navy more than quadrupled, from a

pre-war strength of about 30,000 to a peak in 1810 of 140,000; and the Army increased five-fold, from 45,000 to 250,000 by 1812. As Jane Austen was concerned almost entirely with the officers, the two sections that follow take no account of the non-commissioned ranks.

The Army and the Militia

The social composition of the officer corps of the regular army was altogether changed by its rapid wartime expansion – from 3100 officers in 1792 to almost 10,600 by 1814. Whereas in peacetime this was a select body almost entirely composed of the sons of officers, the landed gentry and aristocracy, such was the wartime demand for new officers that 'almost any young man who wished to and was literate would have little difficulty in obtaining a commission'.[8] Applicants had to be between 16 and 21 (although this upper age was often exceeded) and carry a letter of recommendation from a Major or above certifying to their 'character, education and bodily health'.[9] The junior department of the Royal Military College opened in 1802 to train gentlemen cadets aged between 13 and 15. But this new route provided fewer than four per cent of first commissions. The other professional entry was via the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich. This admitted cadets of between 14 and 16 for a rigorous technical course, normally between 18 months and two years but shortened in wartime. It concluded with an examination, the best candidates going into the Royal Engineers, the remainder into the Royal Artillery. But, again, the numbers were small and as many as sixty-five percent of newly-commissioned officers entered the Army wholly untrained. Their military education began when they joined their regiments, as young officers, where they were drilled with the men or under the care of a sergeant, and picked up what they could from the various manuals of instruction. Only officers who had risen from the ranks (one in twenty), and those who joined from the Militia (one in five), would bring any prior military knowledge or skills.

During the war with France, it was easy enough to obtain a commission, and at no cost provided that the applicant declared that he was (in the official wording) 'prepared immediately to join any regiment to which he may be appointed'.[10] For the much smaller number wanting to join an elite regiment of their choice there were barriers both financial and social. Socially, a prospective officer would have to be acceptable to the Colonel of the regiment; and in addition to purchasing his commission he would need the resources to meet mess and other expenses far exceeding his pay. According to the official price list, Ensign, the lowest rank in an infantry regiment, cost £400, in the Foot Guards £600; Cornet, the lowest cavalry rank, in the dragoons £735, in the Blues £1050 and in the Life Guards £1600. These ascending prices are an accurate measure the relative social standing, exclusivity, and expense of the different regiments. According to the regulations of 1809 – tightened since 1795 under the reforms introduced by the Duke of York, the Commander-in-Chief – after three years service a junior officer could sell his existing commission and purchase promotion to Captain, and so on after a further four years to Major and a further two years to Lt Colonel. The price of the commission rose, according to rank and regiment, up to £6700 for Lt Colonel in the Foot Guards. Although only twenty percent of promotions were by this method, nonetheless purchase was valued an important institution. In the eyes of its champions, Wellington among them, it brought to the Army 'men of fortune and education'[11] with a stake in the country's welfare, men who could be trusted in its defence. Seventy per cent of promotions went according to seniority of service; and seniority was the sole mechanism for promotion to Colonel and beyond, as it was for every rank in the Royal Artillery and the Royal Engineers. The remaining ten per cent were promotions by patronage, on the recommendation of the Commander-in-Chief or a general officer for merit or bravery, or to replace an officer dismissed the service.

Such was the cost of army life that even officers with free commissions could barely scrape by on their pay. An infantry Ensign received 5s 3d a day, a Guards' Ensign 5s 10p, a Cornet in the cavalry 8s, and in the Life Guards 8s 6d. Against this came a burden of fees and deductions plus the daily cost of meals, wine, servant, the purchase and upkeep of the uniform and equipment and other minor expenses; in addition, a cavalry officer had to provide his own horse. While an infantry officer might get by with a private allowance of £50 or £100, those moving in London society in the elite regiments needed as much as £500 and more.

The Militia

Alongside yet quite separate from the regular standing Army was the Militia, an auxiliary military force formed solely for the homeland defence of the Kingdom. Dormant in peacetime, it was embodied at the end of 1792 in response to the threat from revolutionary France. The appointment of officers, drawn from the county gentry, was in the hands of the county Lord Lieutenants. Their rank did not depend on military experience or expertise but on a complex system of property qualifications, on the principle that the more a man owned the greater his entitlement to command a force dedicated to the defence of the national property, the Kingdom itself. So to each of the ranks, from Ensign to Colonel, the regulations attached a minimum property requirement. During the years of the war, however, this condition was relaxed, since such was the shortage of officers that – as with the regular army – 'anyone remotely suitable had to be taken on'.[12]

While there are a number of high-ranking Army officers in the novels, including General Tilney and several Colonels, we hear nothing of their military lives save for the fact that Colonel Brandon's regiment was once stationed in the East Indies; and of junior officers, no more than that Frederick Tilney was a Captain in the 12th Light Dragoons (a real regiment, given the title the 'Prince of Wales's by George III in 1768). Of the Militia officers we learn slightly more: that, for example, Mr Weston was formerly a Captain in the Surrey force, fired it seems not by patriotism but to satisfy his 'active cheerful mind and social temper' (E,15). Similarly, Wickham claims that his 'chief inducement' to taking the rank of Lieutenant 'was the prospect of constant society, and good society' (P&P,79). On his marriage to Lydia, Wickham moves over from the Militia to make a career in the regular Army, starting as an Ensign, this rank and his later promotion to unspecified higher ranks purchased for him by Darcy.

The Navy

Away from the battlefield, the Army seemed pleasantly social and amateur, whereas the Navy offered a life-long career, demanding and highly professional. Commissions were only granted after a lengthy period of preparation and training. The examination for Lieutenant called for a minimum of six years' service at sea and candidates, aged 19 and above, had to produce their personal journals and certificates of service. To reach this point, youngsters of between 11 and 13 went straight to sea, designated as 'Captain's servants', later 'Volunteers'. In effect, they were officer cadets in a sea-apprenticeship. Under the direct surveillance of the ship's Captain they were trained in seamanship, navigation, mapping, the construction of the ship, and all the other areas of knowledge and skill they would might need one day in holding a command. The alternative route, taken by only one or two percent, including Jane Austen's sailor brothers Francis and Charles, was via the Royal Navy Academy at Portsmouth. This provided a two to three-year programme, combining naval training and school-room education, for boys aged between 12 and 15 at the time of entry. After the Academy they joined the Volunteers at sea,

continuing for three or four years before presenting themselves as Midshipmen for the Lieutenant's examination.

'Passing for Lieutenant', as it was called, did not automatically bring the rank. This only came with the commission to a specific Lieutenant's post on a ship. Promotion to Commander and then Captain was on merit – but could also be effected by 'influence', the pulling of strings by a relative or patron, perhaps a member of the House of Commons or Lords. Equally helpful was the patronage of a senior naval officer – as Admiral Crawford intervenes to help William Price towards a commission in MP. Promotion above the rank of Captain was according to seniority on the Captain's list. In this, longevity was the secret of success. Witness the later careers of the sailor brothers: Charles promoted Rear-Admiral in 1850 at the age of 71 and Francis at the age of 89 achieving the Navy's highest rank, Admiral of the Fleet.

Naval pay was modest. All Lieutenants received £101 a year. Captains were paid according to the rating of their ships: for the largest three-deckers, with over 100 guns, £386 a year, down to vessels of 20-30 guns, a fraction over £200. And for the periods they were back in England between ships – this could be for a matter of months, even years – they were left to subsist on half-pay. However, there was always the hope of prize money, a share in the value of captured enemy ships. It was a complex and tightly regulated system. But broadly speaking, up to 1808 a three-eighths share went to the Captain and the remaining five-eighths were divided on a diminishing scale, according to rank, amongst the other officers, commissioned and non-commissioned, and the ordinary members of the crew (post-1808, a slight change was made to the allocation of these shares). It was prize money that brings Captain Wentworth his £25,000, the small fortune that plays such a crucial role in the romantic drama of P. There was always the hope of other material rewards too: an elaborate tariff of annuities and cash payments and pensions for those involved in great victories at sea; and, at a more routine level, freight or treasure money paid to Captains for the transport of gold or silver bullion or minted coins, a perk which Francis was grateful for. As Jane Austen put it neatly to her brother, the Navy was a 'Profession' that 'has its'douceurs to recompense for some of its' Privations' (Letters, p.214) – 'privations' that were manifold: absence from family and home; accidents at sea and fever, a toll that far exceeded death or disablement at the hands of the enemy; and a naval culture that led to drunkenness and upheld shipboard discipline of fearful brutality.

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